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SUBJECT: FRANCE'S MUNICIPAL AND CANTONAL ELECTIONS --
WHAT'S AT STAKE ON MARCH 9 AND 16

REF: A. EMBASSY PARIS SIPRNET DAILY REPORTS FOR MARCH 6
[1](#)B. 2008 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified by Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt,
1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY

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- [1](#)1. (U) In a two-round election Sunday March 9 and Sunday March 16, France's voters will go to the polls to elect the municipal councils of their -- nearly 37,000 - communes of residence. These communal (also called municipal) councils in turn elect, from among their members, the country's nearly 37,000 mayors. At the same time, on March 9 and 16, France's voters will also elect, from half their cantons of residence, a representative to their departmental council. In all, nearly half a million elective offices will be filled in the upcoming elections as millions of individuals run for public office -- an exemplary exercise in local level, representative self-government.
- [1](#)2. (U) In the municipal elections, the center-left Socialist Party (PS) is banking on its incumbents' generally well-regarded performance and on President Sarkozy's unpopularity to fuel a strong showing for its candidates, particularly in the big cities and towns. A net gain in PS municipal councilors, led by resulting PS mayoral victories in big cities, would allow the center-left to claim a national, "anti-Sarkozy" victory. The media will also be viewing the election through a polarizing lens that will filter out the random, locally-driven aggregate results and filter in the, putative, role of an anti-Sarkozy "sanction vote" driving those results.
- [1](#)3. (C) Notwithstanding the spin battle over the election results, President Sarkozy's determination and ability to pursue his reform agenda will be largely unaffected by the expected poor showing by his party's candidates for local office. Though Sarkozy may have become personally unpopular, his national reform project retains broad support. Local issues are expected to be the primary drivers of the results of these nationwide, local elections. End Summary.

MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

14. (U) On Sunday, March 9 and Sunday March 16, in a complex, two-round electoral process, French voters will go to the polls to elect the members of the communal councils of the country's 36,683 communes. "Communal council" and "municipal council" are two ways of saying the same thing (as is "district council" (conseil d'arrondissement)). Communes vary greatly in sociological character and demographic size. For example, Paris' XV arrondissement, a predominantly residential area of a particularly densely populated Western capital, has a municipal council of 51 members and a population of about 230,000. At the other end of the spectrum is the commune of Rochefourchat in south-central France; there, the twelve candidates for the nine-member municipal council are themselves over two-thirds of the hamlet's registered voters. All communes of under 100 residents have municipal councils of 9 members; the size of municipal councils rises in proportion to population, with communes of over 300,000 allotted councils of 69 members. Special provisions are in place for France's three largest cites, Paris, Marseille and Lyon. In these cities, in each of their arrondissements, voters also choose a number of representatives to serve on the greater city council. For example, in Paris' XV arrondissement of the 51 arrondissement council members, 17 also serve on the 163-member Paris City Council.

15. (U) Ninety-eight percent of the 36,683 communes have populations of less than 10,000 people; taken all together, this 98 percent of communes is home to only 48 percent of the country's population -- hence political parties' focus on the remaining 2 percent of communes where over half the people live. The 36,683 municipal councils elected on March 16, will, by law, meet for the first time on March 21, 22, or 23 and then elect, from among their members, the country's 36,683 new mayors. In Paris, Marseille and Lyon, the greater city council, drawn from the results of the arrondissement

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council elections, elects the mayor of city. All municipal councilors and mayors are elected to six-year terms. The last municipal elections were in 2001. The elections that should have taken place six years afterward (in 2007) were postponed until 2008 so as spare voters "election overload," as the establishment of a five-year presidential term (and, so far, concomitant five-year terms for members of the National Assembly) required presidential and legislative elections in 2007.

CANTONAL ELECTIONS

16. (U) Also, on March 9 and 16, France's voters will be voting in half their cantons of residence for their canton's representative to the departmental council. France is famously divided into 100 departments; each of which is in turn divided into between 15 and 79 cantons (which in many places still roughly conform to the country's pre-Revolutionary parishes). Each canton sends one representative to the departmental council; departmental councilors are also elected to six-year terms, with half of every departmental council renewed every three years. Slightly more than 2,000 departmental councilors will be elected on March 9 and 16 since there are 4,048 cantons in France's 96 metropolitan and 4 overseas departments. About 2,000 were elected in 2004, at the time of the last regional and cantonal elections; these 2,000 will continue to serve until the regional and cantonal elections of 2010. There is no departmental council for the department of Paris; the Paris City Council discharges the duties of both a municipal and departmental council. Currently, 51 departmental councils (including Paris) are majority center-left, and 49 are majority center-right.

DEPARTMENTAL COUNCILS AND MUNICIPAL COUNCILS AND MAYORS

17. (U) Departmental councils, as part of a long-standing

policy of decentralization of power, receive a budget from the central government along with a portion of local taxes (see below) that is applied, as the departmental council may decide, to a range of social services, education, health care, and infrastructure activities in the department. Municipal councils are responsible for managing a range of local government activities -- everything from civil registry to daycare, from zoning to organizing elections -- and receive a portion of France's four local taxes, which date back to the French Revolution: taxes on land, taxes on buildings, taxes on furnished property rented or owned (taxe d'habitation), and licensing fees for trade and manufacturing activities. The mayor is, all at the same time, the president of the municipal council responsible for executing the council's decisions ("decentralized" powers as the French call them), a magistrate empowered to authorize the detention of suspects apprehended by municipal police (judicial powers), and an official of the central government who, under the direction of the departmental prefect, is responsible for implementing election laws and the like ("devolved" powers as the French call them.) France's mayors also do weddings.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

18. (C) With nearly half a million elective offices at stake and, literally, millions of citizens standing for public office across France, these elections are clearly an exemplary exercise in democratic, representative self-government at the local level. The results, however, are unlikely to bring much change, particularly change of any consequence to U.S. interests. Growing dissatisfaction with President Sarkozy's personal style and the results of his administration's reforms so far could translate into a wholesale rejection of his party's candidates for local office. Even so -- that is, if the losses of the ruling center-right Union for Popular Movement (UMP) party are greater than expected, and if they are seen to stem from voters' motivation to cast an anti-Sarkozy "sanction vote" -- the results of this aggregation of local elections are still unlikely to significantly weaken Sarkozy's determination and ability to pursue his reform agenda. The administration, nevertheless, is hedging its bets, preemptively moving to minimize the impact of any "sanction vote" readings of the election results. Most notably, the week before the

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election, the popular Prime Minister, Francois Fillon, hit the campaign trail underlining the administration's commitment to accelerate its reform agenda as soon as the elections are over.

19. (C) The spin battle over the expected results -- non-negligible net gains by the PS, especially in big cities -- in fact began weeks ago. Those, on the center-right, who would minimize the significance of the PS's expected gains point out that the center-left is merely "taking back" what it "traditionally" held, that is, before its severe losses in the last municipal elections in 2001. Minimizers also point out that these are "mid-term elections" of a sort, and the party in power "always" suffers setbacks in such elections. Most importantly, minimizers point out that these are local elections in which voters are, by far-and-away, motivated by the local issues that impact their daily lives and by their judgment of the performance of incumbents whom they know. In this view, dissatisfaction with the performance of UMP mayoral incumbents should not be attributed to dissatisfaction with President Sarkozy (though it will be). Also, those who dismiss the national significance of likely PS gains point out that the approval ratings of Prime Minister Fillon continue to climb, indicating continued, widespread public approval of the overall direction of administration policy.

THE HOPES OF THE CENTER-LEFT

110. (U) Its rosy prospects in these municipal and cantonal

elections, coming after the PS's third straight defeat in presidential contests, have stirred up considerable hope among Socialists that a strong showing could put the party on the come-back trail as a credible alternative to the center-right at the national level. There is no doubt about the PS's credibility for governing locally; indeed, "municipal socialism," the PS's proven competence in local government, is the party's only remaining strong suit, particularly since Sarkozy's policy of "opening" to the left has stripped the Socialist party of some of its most able and innovative national leaders. The PS is hoping that a strong showing in the upcoming municipal and cantonal elections (but particularly in the municipal elections) will do three things: 1) reveal the tenuousness of Sarkozy's mandate for reform notwithstanding his crushing victory in the presidential election less than a year ago, 2) make PS-led local governments and the policies they create a counter center of power and policy to the administration reforms opposed by PS constituents, and 3) provide the party with the confidence needed to transform itself, at long last, into a "normal" modern, European Social-Democratic party. There is no way to tell if this election will result in any of these things for the PS, but there is no doubt that, compared to the demoralized state of party officials and supporters as little as two months ago, the party's brightening prospects in these elections have clearly had an energizing effect on party leaders and party faithful alike.

HOW TO TELL WHO WON

11. (U) Most political analysts will be using two barometers to compare the relative standing of the two major parties once this election is over -- relative number of municipal council seats won and relative number of majorities in municipal councils in cities and large towns. In the last municipal council elections in 2001, the PS and other leftist parties with at least one representative in National Assembly won 9775 municipal council seats; the UMP (or precursor parties) and other rightist parties with at least one representative in the National Assembly won 9722 municipal council seats. Any significant change from practically even will be touted as victory by the party that comes out ahead. More significant is the number of municipal councils controlled (and therefore mayors elected) in cities and large towns. The center-left currently controls the municipal councils of 170 of the cities and towns with a population of over 20,000 people; the center-right controls the municipal councils in 220 such cities and towns. The PS has set a target of a net gain of 30 of these major cities and towns as its benchmark for victory in the upcoming elections. Another variation of this barometer is majorities in municipal

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councils in cities and towns of over 30,000; the PS and allies have majorities in the municipal councils of 102 of these cities and towns, the UMP and allies in 132.